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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effect of personal narratives on preservice teachers' professional identity development, describing the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater preservice program and discussing how one professor used life stories in conjunction with prepracticum experiences to enhance students' perceptions about the teaching profession. Students in an observation and participation (O&P) course worked as participant observers and/or paraprofessionals within urban classrooms. They attended a series of on-campus seminars that encouraged understanding of pedagogy and practice by exploring experiences in the field. An examination of their professional growth during their O&P experience highlighted the use of personal narratives as an instructional method which encouraged praxis and reflection. Data comes from an ongoing study about the impact of block pedagogy, instruction, and design on students' beliefs, perceptions, and professional readiness. Overall, using reflective narratives as texts caused students to think more deeply and realistically about their newly chosen profession and to adjust their initial beliefs and assumptions about teachers' roles in the classroom. As a result, students' perceptions of teachers and teaching became more inclusive and realistic, with students more prepared to face the challenges of real classrooms and real students. Teaching stories are appended. (Contains 26 references.) (SM)

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Passing the Torch: Developing Students' Professional Identity through Connected Narratives

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Passing the Torch: Developing Students' Professional Identity through Connected Narratives

Abstract

This article examines the effectiveness of personal narratives on novice and aspiring teachers' professional identity development. It does so by looking specifically at the preprofessional program at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater and discusses how one professor used life-stories in conjunction with prepracticum experiences to enhance her students' perceptions about the teaching profession. This study finds that using reflective narratives as texts caused participating education majors to think more deeply and realistically about their newly chosen profession and to adjust their initial beliefs and assumptions about the role of teachers in classrooms.

Author's Biographical Statement

Dr. Robin Mello is an assistant professor of Educational Foundations at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater as well as a professional storyteller. Her research focuses on how narrative and arts-based approaches to learning effect development.

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Passing the Torch: Developing Students' Professional Identity through Connected Narratives

By Robin Mello, Ph.D.

Introduction

There are widespread misgivings regarding the efficacy of teacher education programs within our institutions of higher education. Course work is often perceived to be impractical, redundant, and removed from the realities of the life of a professional teacher. Complaints regarding the bureaucratic nature and time consuming structure of licensure programs are also prevalent within the profession. In addition, education is viewed, by society as a whole, to be an occupation that attracts the least able individuals (Clifford & Guthrie, 1988). Research literature supports the widespread existence of these attitudes, finding that veteran teachers consistently report feeling that their college preparation was inadequate or deficient, especially when these educators reflect on the applicability of university curricula to practice (Clifford & Guthrie, 1988; Grant & Murray, 1999; Lampert & Ball, 1999).

Despite attempts by colleges of education, nationwide, to ground the development and learning of new and aspiring teachers within the practice itself, attitudes toward university-based education programs remain negative. This pessimistic attitude dominates the profession, despite some evidence suggesting that some campus-based courses are effective, sometimes more so than immersion or alternative licensure programs (Fullan, 1993; Kennedy, 1999; Lampert & Ball, 1999). However, current findings also suggest that university-based programs must respond to their critics by becoming more inclusive of faculty innovation, responsive to K-12 reform, supportive of multiple methodologies, and creative in their use of action research. In addition, they must assist students in making useful real-life connections between theory and practice on an ongoing basis by supporting the idea that teachers are involved in life-long learning processes (Ayers, 1990; Ethell & McMeniman, 2000; Lampert & Ball, 1999).

In light of these conclusions, Ball & Cohen (1999) recommend altering teacher education programs by reworking content at both the pedagogical and practical level. They

also suggest that higher education develop a new "pedagogy of professional development," one that supports educational reform and innovative practices. Toward this goal, the professorate must take a deeper look at how their instruction models best practice, engages students, supports professional goals, and provides guidance on how to create inclusive and tolerant classrooms. In addition, faculty must educate aspiring educators by constructing forums for experimentation and critique that investigate how teachers and students interact in classrooms on a daily basis.

The PreProfessional Core

With the second largest teacher education program in the state, the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater (UW-W) has begun to address some of these issues by offering an initial preprofessional curriculum that every student, aspiring to be an elementary school teacher, must complete. As a fundamental experience it is both foundational to, and a prerequisite for, admission to the professional licensure program offered within the College of Education.

The group of courses that make up this core, known euphemistically as "the block," includes an initial field experience (course title: *Observation and Participation in Urban Schools)* as well as courses in diversity and human development. *Observation and Participation* (O&P) requires students to become members of a learning-cohort and to volunteer in an urban elementary school for fifty hours in the middle of the fifteen-week semester. During their O&P experience, students work as participant-observers and/or paraprofessionals within the classroom. Students also attend a series of on-campus seminars that are designed to encourage understanding of pedagogy and practice through the exploration of experiences in the field.

The following is an examination of UW-W students' professional growth during their O&P experience. Specifically, this discussion focuses on the use of personal narrative as an instructional method, one that was purposely designed to encourage praxis and reflection through what Lampert (1999) calls the "discourse of practice." It uses data and findings from a larger, ongoing, qualitative study investigating the efficacy of 'block' pedagogy, instruction, and design on students' beliefs, perceptions, and professional readiness. All of the data used here are quoted verbatim and are

representative of the entire data set. In addition, all participants are named by aliases in order to ensure anonymity.

Student Participants

Like teacher candidates nationwide, a majority of O&P students at UW-W are white and female. Most report growing up in small midwestern towns or cities where they attended public high schools with graduating classes between 50-500. Many have not traveled beyond the four-state area that includes Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota. Their understanding of schools, classrooms, and children come from their experience of schooling as children, as well as working at local church and bible schools, summer camps, Head Start programs, or other community-based childcare facilities. In addition, most work their way through college, often finding employment in the childcare industry.

Their top four reasons for choosing to pursue a career in education include the following:

a) Experiencing a calling for, or a life-long interest in, the teaching profession;

b) Wanting to be teachers because they "love being around children;"

c) Having parents or family members whom encouraged them to become teachers;

d) Believing that teaching will give them access to a middle class income and life-style; over 30% are enrolled in the UW-W program are first generation college students from working class or farm families.

Although they do not know it yet, these young people are part of what Grant and Murray (1999) define as the "second academic revolution." They suggest that this cohort will be called on, in future, to "make the major educational decisions…buttressed by the law and the bureaucracy…They must show that they are not just generalized caring agents but have special knowledge unique to teaching"(Grant & Murray, p. 224). Being part of a 'second academic revolution' will require them, and the professorate who support their development, to proactively address inclusive, diverse, contemporary social issues during a period of national interest in educational reform and change. The many and varied political and social agendas supporting change within the public educational system nationwide will also demand that they assess their

attitudes and beliefs toward teaching in order to enter the classroom with responsive approaches to instruction.

Changing Aspiring Teachers' Perceptions

In light of the new outcomes and benchmarks that have been introduced into the field, I, as an O&P supervisor/seminar instructor, begin each semester by asking students to explore the value of reflective practice and constructivist pedagogy as well as be informed about current theory and research literature. In addition, I focus a great deal of the course syllabus on promoting student understanding of how schooling impacts young peoples' lives. The majority of my O&P students, on the other hand, begin their 'block' courses by responding to the syllabus and curriculum, as well as their professor, with diffidence and doubt. As a result, they come to their first few seminars focused on their own comfort level and are suspicious of anything resembling difference or change. This attitude is exacerbated by suspicions, stereotypes, and misinformation about the nature of urban classrooms - much of which has been learned from media - as well as their interest in "getting on with their careers." Many enroll in the 'block' with a belief that their college preparation includes "too much busy work and not enough being in classrooms with real children." In addition, most view their field experience with fear or skepticism.

In order to engage with the world-view of my students and encourage them to build mature connected professional visions or understandings, I needed to find methods that over time, might encourage them to rethink, or at least ameliorate, their skeptical attitudes toward their newly chosen profession. In addition, my goal was to encourage them to develop more inclusive and realistic attitudes toward classroom teaching, ones that would be supportive of their development and learning overtime.

Since I am both a teacher and a storyteller, I choose to work on establishing a climate of thoughtfulness about the nature of classrooms by sharing narratives and teaching stories. Subsequently, I developed eight "teaching tales" all drawn from my own personal teaching experiences out of a wide range of venues such as prisons, charter schools, public schools, special education programs, and hospitals. This compilation of stories (whose titles include "How I Learned not to Yell," "The Empty Classroom," "Help! I am a First Year Teacher," "The WORST Student EVER," etc.), became one of two primary texts for the O&P course.

Narratives were selected from a wide variety of life events and specifically chosen because the plots were resonant with events or issues my students were currently grappling with in their O&P classrooms.

It was assumed that, by sharing stories of successes and failures, these narratives would assist students in adjusting and examining their perceptions of the nature of schooling and the role of teachers in schools. The efficacy of the stories was investigated through interviews, discussions, advising sessions, and surveys. Students responded by reflecting on how reading the stories assisted their learning.

> Celia: *There are always conflicts in [my professors' stories], but at the end a valuable lesson is learned.*

> Susan: *I read these stories and gain another perspective about testing your own ideas and their validity for teaching. They are some of the most interesting reading we have in college.*

The opportunity to reflect on experience in classrooms gave UW-W students a rationale to became clearer about teachers' limitations and abilities as well as their own position as students new to the profession. Seminar discussion and texts provided language and conceptual frameworks for exploring the daily failures and successes experienced in the classrooms in both a personal and connected manner as students began, midway through the semester, to share their own "teaching tales." One of these stories, enjoyed by the entire cohort, was told by Rebecca, a student who had experienced intense trepidation at having to be in "the inner city school with all those guns and gangs." As she worked in her assigned third-grade placement Rebecca relaxed, her reflection deepened, and she began to view her cooperating teacher with sympathy and humor. One seminar session she wrote and shared the following story as a response:

> *One morning in the third-grade the teacher was having the kids tell what they were going to do over the weekend. When one of the girls was explaining what she was going to do, one of the boys was digging in his desk. The teacher stopped the girl's explanation and scolded the boy for not paying attention. She said he was*

being rude to the girl and missing out on what she was talking about. He just looked at the teacher and told her he had heard everything. He then went into a long explanation of exactly what the girl was going to be doing that weekend. Everyone started laughing hysterically as he just kept going, including the teacher. When he was done, he just casually said: "See, I was listening." When the teacher finally stopped laughing she apologized for thinking he hadn't been listening and asked him to stop digging in his desk.

By sharing and reflecting on the third-grade teacher's mistake, Rebecca was able, for the first time in her O&P career, to explore the premise that teachers can be learners; teachers are allowed to make mistakes. Through her own 'teaching tale' Rebecca also had an opportunity, along with her fellow college students, to reflect more thoughtfully and empathetically on the role of teachers and students in classrooms.

Building Professional Identity through Empathy

Stories helped O&P students empathize and build relationships with their cooperating teachers, cohort members, and college instructor. Subsequently, this connection came in handy when a crisis or dilemma occurred on site. It diminished the initial anxiety and suspicion regarding the O&P experience and encouraged sharing between the professor and her students. In addition, it lessened fears of "feeling too vulnerable in front of students."

Lisa: *When my professor was new she was scared too, she experienced failures as well, now she's successful but it took time. I'll do the same thing. It really helps to know that she was once just like me.*

Rita: *I listen to her stories and I think about what I am doing in the classroom and I realize that everything is not perfect, it doesn't have to be perfect and humor is the best way to overcome things when you are teaching.*

> Pat: *Her stories make it really easy to identify with her because it makes me realize that, hey, even though she is a professor she was once in the same position as we are now [student teachers]. These were lessons in sharing fears, which makes me feel less inferior. It makes me think, hey, this could happen to me and that makes me feel that I can teach.*

Encouraging Membership as a Core Value

The development of empathy and understanding between the various constituent groups involved in O&P helped build a more measured and balanced response to events experienced on-site in classrooms. UW-W students began to adjust their attitude toward teaching, seeing it as an expertise that can be learned over time-as opposed to an innate skill. Students also began to develop a more pragmatic approach toward failure, observing that making mistakes was part of their professional development.

> Martha: *I actually get the picture now that not all teaching experiences are positive. Also, that teaching is a learning experience for the teacher as well as the students.*

As they learned to fear failure less they also invited trial and error more.

> Linda: *I now know that I will make mistakes. We all make mistakes. It's part of teaching and part of learning and while teaching we don't have to be perfect. And teaching isn't easy; it's that we get to find out some negative things. I learn a lot more from hearing my professor's stories. You have to teach and teach and teach and get a lot of experience to be effective. Getting through to kids and being a good teacher takes time.*

> Celia: *I now know that anything can happen when I become a teacher, and that these situations have happened to other people, even my professor! I am not so frightened about having a difficult day or doing something that doesn't work. I'll just learn and keep learning.*

O&P students also gained a sense of history from reading and sharing the teaching stories, linking their own experiences as aspiring teachers to the profession as a whole. Through both hands-on experience and reflective stories UW-W students were given both a perspective on, and a membership in, the profession. This sense of membership was supported by the cohort model used in the 'block' and was one of the most successful outcomes of the course. Students came to think of themselves as part of a larger whole, one that included their professor, cooperating teachers, as well as themselves.

Defining Best Practice

Using the stories of teaching as reflective tools helped students reevaluate and redefine their understanding of the profession. For example, in the beginning of their O&P experience a majority of students reported believing that good teachers were always able to cope, consistently happy, and continually ready to love and care about children. In addition, they expected that elementary students would be compliant, well behaved, and motivated to learn. Typical comments included; "I think good teachers are happy, kind, and love children;" "A good teacher is fun and likes her students:" or "A good teacher is one who handles every situation to the best of their ability and allows each student to learn better."

> Amy: *Kids are so adorable, so full of life, so happy, and looking for answers about the world. It makes me happy just to see a child smile. As a teacher, if I can make all my kids smile at least once, then I will be happy because for some reason or another I have influenced then in a positive way.*

However, as students were required to assist teachers in urban school settings they began to question their initial ideas regarding the nature of 'good teaching.' Conversations focused on the limitations and demands that classroom teachers face daily. The difficulty of meeting all students' needs, lack of resources, rigidity of school culture, and children's behavior and reactions to classroom expectations were all surprises that confronted the UW-W preprofessional. As a result, the first few weeks of seminar discussion revolved around feeling overwhelmed by the assignment.

In response to their fear and anxiety I assigned a personal recollection that is both humorous and outrageous: I got locked in a closet by first graders during my first month of teaching. This story came to be the favorite because it was seen as both redemptive (the professor survived and is still teaching) and humane (we can laugh about it now). Applying this story to their own experience in the schools gave students grounding for the actual difficulties involved in public school teaching. Slowly, changes in attitudes and perceptions shifted. At the end of the semester, instead of defining teachers as people who "taught all children so that each individual learns" or "liked children and were nice," these novice teachers had modified their views observing instead that teaching was about "gaining diverse perspectives," "testing your own ideas to see if they work with students," developing professional abilities over time, and "exploring what students need to know with as many possible solutions for each students as possible." It is also about learning from experience.

> Gretchen: *Good teachers make mistakes and learn from them. Also, [our seminar work] literally shows us that we can learn best from our mistakes, it's those things that make us better teachers.*

> Tara: *When you see and hear about things that really happened in real classrooms then I think that if my professor can get through then I can too, no matter what. These stories are the ones I will look back on when I make my own mistakes.*

Conclusion

> William: *My professors' teaching stories relate the class information to real life [teaching in school]. They make it more tangible for me and more fun to learn about teaching too.*

The prepracticum 'block' was created to introduce aspiring teachers to the classroom. It was also designed to help students define their professional identity and to reexamine their career goals. Students, through narrative and hands-on processes, had an opportunity to reflect on the realities of teaching.

The outcome of this approach was that students reported changes in their concept of the profession.

The connected nature of the instructional materials afforded O&P students opportunities to confront their own assumptions about teaching and modify their expectations in practical and pragmatic ways. As a result, student perceptions of teachers and teaching became more inclusive and realistic. The outcome was that students were more prepared to face the challenge of real classrooms and real students.

As the university supervisor, I was heartened to see that a beginning investigation of the roles and capabilities of teachers, as illustrated through real-life teaching stories, proved useful to students especially as they began their professional development. Although the data used here are both limited in scope and collected from a small narrowly defined student population, findings suggest that college faculty continue to focus on sharing the experiences of actual practice and connecting these experiences to hands-on field work. In addition, by providing university-based forums for critique and reflection, an inquiry of practice can be established, one that welcomes novice teachers as members of a professional community.

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HELP!

It was my first year of teaching in a public school and my hopes were high. I was full of idealistic dreams and imagined that my first classroom would be wonderful. I could see in my mind's eye the picture of all my students as they laughed, worked, and made great progress. I was sure I would teach them to love learning. I even pictured the cards and gifts they would bring me - I was so excited!!!!

Ah, but a very different picture was in store for me when I finally got my first classroom. There were three boys who were special education students-all attending the same elementary school. During second grade each of these children had many run-ins with the principal. Sammy had come to school with a shotgun and had been expelled for the rest of the year. Alex had been punching and biting; he finally threw a desk at the teacher and was also expelled. Larry was "developmentally delayed." He couldn't read, write, or tie his shoes, but he knew how to get in trouble. This was mostly due to the fact that Alex was his best friend and was always talking Larry into doing things. Larry couldn't say NO.

I was hired to teach these three boys in a separate 3rd grade classroom that was housed in the Kindergarten wing. The principal (not a very patient man) hated my students and he had very little patience with me.

I walked into the classroom on the first day of school and waited for the boys to arrive. At 9:00 the buses had come and gone but there was no sign of my students. At 10:00 I went looking for them and found them in the office, suspended for the day for smoking in the boys' bathroom. After they were released to their parents the principal gave me along lecture on doing my job. I went home upset but determined to make Tuesday and great day.

The next morning I met the buses, walked my students to the classroom, shut the door and began to talk. Sammy got up and began to run around the room. Alex started throwing things at Larry who got angry and began to curse. I was in desperation! They didn't act like my dream class at all. What should I do? Ah! When in doubt do something fun. So, I went into the closet to get some art supplies. No sooner was my back turned then Sammy ran over to the

closet, slammed the door, and turned the knob so that the door was stuck! I was locked in the closet on the second day of school!

I could hear the boys laughing as they opened a window, jumped out and ran off toward town. I sat in the dark in the closet. First I said some very bad words. Then I cried. Then I got angry. No child was going to make me quit teaching. I could be a good teacher, it was just going to take A LOT of practice.

Well, about an hour later the police brought my students back to school. The principal and the policeman let me out of the closet (I have never been so embarrassed in my life). Coming back to school to teach the next day was probably one of the hardest things I've ever done in my entire life. How I found the courage I don't know.

I went to school one day at a time all that year. I tried again, and again, and again. Until, much to my surprise, the school year had vanished - and miracle of miracles - Sammy was crying because he didn't want to go home for summer vacation!

I learned a great lesson from those three boys. I learned that what matters is not success - it's trying, attempting, having courage, and believing against the odds. What Sammy, Larry, and Alex taught me was that I could fail and still succeed.

The Activist

This "teaching in the trenches" story is about my very first job. I was hired fresh out of college to teach theatre, art, and reading at a school which was attached to a lockdown facility for youthful offenders(kids with criminal records ranging from arson to rape). I was hired to
take the place of a teacher who left mid year. When she left she took all the supplies (such as pencils, pens, paper, files). What she left behind was taken - over the course of semester - by others (this was a very poorly run school with very limited resources).

Any way, the other teachers noticed that a room was standing empty, so of course, they emptied it further. Chairs, desks, tables, blackboards, file cabinets all disappeared into other classrooms and offices. When I arrived(a week before school was officially began) I saw an empty room! I had four walls, a floor, three windows, and a very high ceiling. That's it!

I was fresh from college. No one in all my courses had ever prepared me

for anything like this. We certainly didn't cover the absence of resources in any of my methods classes. Well, being the ex-New Yorker/child of the 60/70's that I was, I stormed the offices of the prison director. He informed me that no supplies (this included furniture) could be given to me unless authorized by the accountant/comptroller. Two hours later I had tracked down the accountant only to discover that "no supplies or furniture would be given to me until the paperwork was filled out and budgets were cleared."

How long would this take?

Approximately 3 months!

I stood there with my mouth open imagining the first day of school - me - twenty boys with violent tendencies - and an empty room. Visions of panic and horror danced before my eyes. Well what could I do? What else was there to do? I staged a sit in. Now, for those of you who were not alive in the 60's or 70's a sit in was when college students took over the offices of people like deans and presidents of colleges. Many were in support of the civil rights movement or to protest the Vietnam War. I sat down. On his desk (the accountants') and refused to move. I told him that if I didn't get money for supplies that day I'd live in his office until the money did arrive. He was so amazed that in 15-min. (I do not exaggerate) I had $3000 at my disposal.

That whole week I combed the used furniture dealers, Good Will stores, and discount warehouses. By the next Monday my first class arrived. There were tables and chairs and a blackboard. There were huge boxes of supplies to make projects with, three bookcases packed with the best that the thrift stores had to offer, and best yet, a huge old soft armchair that someone had left on the curb for the trash person to pick up. That armchair was the hit of the school.

I didn't know it then but my long love affair with teaching and Goodwill stores had just begun.

How I Learned Not to Yell

We need to go backwards to the school where I did my student teaching. The State University of New York at Albany ran the program I was in and the University required all student teachers enrolled in my program to teach two semesters at two different placements. One experience had to be in a public school and the other "an institutional

setting." So, in the fall I was placed at a High School outside of Schenectady, NY.

My job was to create a program that supported students who were failing Social Studies and Science. These were considered the hardest subjects to pass. (Keep in mind as well, that NY State had an exam that all High School students had to pass in order to graduate). I loved my placement! I had such great time. All day long I worked with students, saw progress, worked with my supervisor (his name was Hank and he was terrific), and made friends with some of the teachers in the school. I really felt that I was learning a lot about teaching. I adored the High School level and I knew I had found my calling. Then, the bottom fell out of my life (or so I thought).

One morning just before Christmas break Hank came to me with my transfer papers. After the holidays I was to show up for my spring placement - at a preschool for developmentally delayed and physically challenged children. I was so upset! I could hardly see straight! How could they ask me to leave the school and students I loved? What were they thinking? I begged and pleaded. I wrote letters to the dean. I had my mother call. It did no good. So, in January I showed up at the preschool determined to hate everything.

When you are determined to hate everything it usually works out that way. In addition, everything hates you too. I was miserable. It seemed to me that my class of 4 year olds didn't seem to be able to do anything right. The students wouldn't listen to what I said and I was sure that they were out of control every time they wiggled.

Then one day it happened! I was supposed to be teaching a young girl named Claire how to tie her shoes. We'd been working on this task for about three weeks. I was frustrated, she was frustrated, and I started yelling; shouting at the top of my lungs.

There I was standing in the hallway loosing it. Claire was crying. She threw her shoes at me. Suddenly I turned around. The director of the preschool was standing directly in back of me (her name was Susan). She didn't say a word, just tapped me on the shoulder and motioned with her hand for me to follow.

I walked into Susan's office and felt as if the floor was going to swallow me up. I wanted to disappear. I was prepared for Susan to fire me or fail me. I was waiting for the big explosion. But nothing happened. Instead she smiled, leaned over to me and said, in a calm, reassuring,

and quiet voice, "Robin, you don't have to yell at a student ever."

There was a pause.

"You have the makings of a great teacher Robin, you just don't know
it yet."

Another pause.

"It's not about making children do what you want and it's not about how much you know about children either. Teaching is about getting to know yourself and your students. It isn't easy, but I think if you got that chip off your shoulder and weren't so scared of the kids you'd be happier."

More pause (I didn't know what to say).

"You are scared but what you forget is that Claire is too. Just remember, you never have to yell - yelling doesn't work anyway. Now get back out there and try again."

Well, I went back down the hall very ashamed of myself. I put my hand out to Claire. I said, "I am sorry Claire, I won't ever yell again. Now let's try that shoe lace one more time."

Since that time I have never yelled at a student, even when I taught in the prison. I have found other ways to establish guidelines and be heard. Susan was right. Yelling is a reaction of people who feel scared, exhausted, angry, and powerless. Susan gave me very good advice. By not punishing, failing, or yelling at me she showed me what a powerful tool compassion can be. Thank goodness.

Now, after many many many years as a teacher, I've come to believe that teaching is about building relationships. It's also about facing your fears. It's definitely not about yelling. Now when I walk down the halls in Milwaukee and hear teachers yelling, I think "they are scared and maybe they never had a Susan in their lives."

The Mystery Date

Let's go back to the High School in Schenectady where I was doing my residency/student teaching. It was during my graduate-college days. I was dating three young men at the time (dating was a lot different back then). The 'boy friends'' names were: Ed (a musician), Andy (on the track team), and Bob (a medical student). (This information it comes in handy at the end).

In the social studies department was a young teacher whose name was Bob. He had a crush on me. He used to moon

around the tutoring room when I was teaching, making a pest of himself, and asking for my phone number. It was embarrassing to me. (I've learned a lot since it's also against any number of college, state, and federal laws). I giggled. I put him off. I tried to be nice with out hurting his feelings, etc. etc. What I know now is that it would have been much more mature and professional to say "No."

Well, my birthday happened to fall on a Monday. When I arrived at school that morning I was paged by the main office: "Will Robin Mello please come down to the main office, there is a delivery for her."

I ran down the stairs and along the corridor only to see the FTD florist delivering 2 DOZEN RED ROSES into my hands!! The card said "I love you, Bob." I turned a lovely shade of pink - very like the roses I was holding. Suddenly I was inundated with secretaries, students, and teachers "who are they from?" Then, the principal came along and read the card.

NOT GOOD. He figured out pretty quickly that a staff member was romancing a student! Suddenly there was another page over the announcement speaker: "will Bob X (name left out to protect the innocent) please come to the main office." When he came around the corner I turned magenta.

We were both called to the principal's office where we were informed of the following information: 1) It is not a sensible thing to date someone you work with, 2) It is against university policy to date anyone who is supervising your work (and vice versa), 3) It's like dating your college professor -WHICH IS REALLY REALLY REALLY NOT OK. 4) Bob was disturbing the school day and not setting a good role model or example for teenagers. Bob never even looked at me again.

What's the moral? Hah! the flowers didn't come from Bob the teacher, they came from Bob the medical student! I was never so embarassed in all my life. And I was mad at Bob the medical student FOR NOT INCLUDING HIS LAST NAME! But that's also what you get for dating too many people at the same time. Ah, the joys of student teaching -----. The end.

The "Worst Kid In School"

This story takes place at a Junior High School in a small city in Maine, (my third teaching job), where I was the special education teacher for a "self contained" classroom of children (mostly boys) who were diagnosed with

severe behavioral or emotional problems. During the summer between sessions I got a call from the principal warning me that: "Brian is coming to your class this year, you'd better watch out."

Then, I started getting calls from other teachers who said things like: "Brian is a handful."

"You are going to be in for some real trouble."

"Do you need any help?"

"Are you going to be OK?"

"Just wait until school starts you will be in big trouble if Brian shows up."

Brian had a reputation for causing fights, stealing, truancy, and general mayhem. The gym teacher (200 lbs. and 6'6'') was afraid of him. As the first day of school approached the panic among the rest of the school staff increased. A rumor circulated stating that Brian had put his last teacher in the hospital by throwing a desk at her.

Brian was in the 8th grade, but, due to the fact that he had never come to school consistently, he had been kept back four times! This meant that Brian was almost 17 and he still in Junior High School! So, I prepared for Brian.

Well, the first day of school arrived and, sure enough, Brian came shuffling into the room. He was a big student, about 5'10" (which is about 7" taller than I was), he was the only eight grader with a full beard and mustache, and he looked mean (biker jacket, tattoo, old jeans, metal work boots). He didn't say a word to me - just shuffled over to a desk, (which was much too small), and hunched over it. As a matter of fact, Brian stayed hunched up all first period. But, he was behaving himself - and that was a good thing. No flying desks. No major battles. Good.

After getting the rest of my band of merry men off to a series of small group sessions, I sat down with Brian and asked him a very important question, which I am sure has already occurred to most of you: "Brian, why are you here?" (In Maine you are not required to go to school after the age of 14).

He said, in a kind of mumble, " I wanna' learn to read."

"Really!?!"

I knew I had the key. Brian explained that every year on the first day of school he would show up because he wanted to learn to read. About the third day of school he'd loose his temper because some one would call him "stupid" or "retard," "dumb," or worse--"half breed." Brian's mom was Native American. This would make Brian so

angry that he lost control. Blood would flow and Brian would be expelled. Then, he would get odd jobs, make a bit of money, and not come back to school until the next September rolled around. All the while, he wanted to learn to read-badly.

So, I made a deal with Brian. Stay in school long enough to learn to read and I would promise to a) teach him to read and b) tutor his older brother (who wanted to read too) at night. In exchange Brian had to keep his temper -- NO FIGHTS -- and not be truant. Surprisingly, it worked! We had Brian reading the newspaper (not perfectly but it was a start) by the end of the school year. His brother learned enough to get a job at the local mill and was able to apply for his drivers' license. (Both Brian and his brother were driving illegally). Another miracle that I am very proud of was that Brian was able to stay in school longer than he ever had. During the second month of school the visiting nurse came around and checked students' hearing, eyesight, etc. It turned out that the hunched over walk of Brian's was not due to his tough guy attitude. He had Scoliosis, a disease of the spine. If Scoliosis isn't caught in childhood it can cause the entire spine to curve over on itself. If this happens the lungs are crushed. Life expectancy without treatment is only 25 years at best.

The child welfare office got Brian's medical bills paid for under a special grant program. He got tutoring while in the hospital (which was great because it was one-on-one instruction all day long). In the spring Brian graduated from Junior High School, walking straight and able to read his diploma. Way to go Brian! Sometimes being a teacher is the most important job in the world.